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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 005106

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV FR VE

SUBJECT: FRENCH RESPONSE TO VENEZUELA DEMARCHE

REF: A. STATE 17165

1B. 04 PARIS 7699

1C. PARIS 993

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Paul Mailhot, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Poloff delivered ref A demarche July 20 to MFA Venezuela desk officer Hedi Picquart. Picquart said that the GOF shared many of our concerns about the Chavez government, particularly in light of recent GOV activities regarding the French oil company Total. At least for the time being, however, the GOF seems willing to accept the status quo. Picquart added that it is difficult to predict the future of Venezuela, and, while the situation is disquieting, it does not yet warrant alarm. Picquart stated that the GOF preferred to "give Chavez the benefit of the doubt" for the moment, maintaining a policy of "positive engagement" while remaining "vigilant" to moves towards authoritarianism. Chavez visited Paris in March; no high level GOV delegations are currently scheduled. End Summary.

Total's Problems

12. (C) Picquart expressed bewilderment at the recent actions of the Venezuelan state-owned oil company against Total. Chavez had sought out Total and initiated the March drilling agreements, so it seemed bizarre that the GOV was now announcing tax fraud and claiming that contracts had been violated. Such actions, and a lack of respect for international law, could have a negative impact on foreign investment, according to Picquart.

Human Rights and Rule of Law

13. (C) In previous discussions on Venezuelan human rights, the GOF has maintained that the creation and implementation of laws was an internal matter (ref B). However, Picquart characterized the trial of four members of the NGO Sumate as indicative of the direction Chavez is taking, and if severe sentences were imposed, this would raise French concerns. Picquart wondered if Chavez might be planning to reduce sentences levied by the court in order to undercut Washington criticism, while at the same time feigning compassion. Regarding recently passed press laws, Picquart judged that the Venezuelan press still operated with great freedom, noting that there were no imprisoned journalists in Venezuela, while also conceding that there may be self-censorship among some members of the media. The appointment of additional members of the Venezuelan Supreme Court was potentially dangerous, Picquart stated, but there had not yet been any decisions that would indicate there was no longer an independent judiciary.

Elections

14. (C) Picquart noted positively that the National Electoral Council (CNE) had accepted the idea of EU observers in upcoming elections and agreed to allow the OAS to audit voting machine software. When the EU offered observers for last August's referendum, he said, the GOV had placed such limiting restrictions on them that their ability to accurately judge the fairness and transparency of the elections would have been undermined and, thus, they did not participate. The EU will evaluate any similar conditions before reaching a decision on participation, probably at the COLAT meeting in Brussels in September.

Military Expansion

15. (C) Picquart indicated that the French do not view Venezuela's recent military acquisitions with our level of misgiving. He reiterated the GOF counterargument to concerns about Russian rifles ending up in hands of Marxist rebels, stating that the FARC are sufficiently armed and have no need of additional weapons (ref C). On the subject of Spanish military sales, Picquart rationalized that the patrol boats could be effective in the counternarcotics effort and the planes sold were only transport vehicles and incapable of offensive attacks. Picquart hinted at potential GOF unease concerning the buildup of the fighting force -- an enlarged reserves to fight narcotics trafficking could be positive, but if done simply to bulk up the standing army then it could be more suspect.

Comment

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16. (C) In almost every area of discussion, the GOF seems to acknowledge our concerns, yet not share our sense of urgency. While freely admitting that Chavez is a populist, Picquart argued that he had not yet shown himself to be an authoritarian. Picquart emphasized that this justified a GOF policy of "positive engagement" in order to avoid pushing Chavez towards Cuba and Iran, citing training programs for judges, customs officials, and hostage rescue teams as evidence of GOF commitment to helping Venezuela. Ultimately, the GOF is still several steps behind in its assessment of Chavez. It appears willing to live with the status quo, while pledging to be "vigilant" against any worsening of the situation. End Comment.

STAPLETON